

EXHIBITION OF MODERN
AMERICAN PAINTINGS, ~ ~
OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE

FEBRUARY THE THIRD THROUGH
FEBRUARY THE TWENTY-FOURTH

1929

WORCESTER ART MUSEUM
WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS

ON OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE PAINTING IN THE WORCESTER ART MUSEUM

The present exhibition is intended as a suggestive experiment. We have arranged in one gallery a group of nineteenth century American paintings from the Museum's collection—paintings already familiar to the public. These have been so grouped as to stress in one part of the exhibition what may be known as objective paintings; in the other those which may be called subjective.

The former class represents the *nature-loving* side of our art, the latter the *mood-loving* side. The aim is to indicate the two points of view into which all works of art have a tendency to fall. It is hoped in this way, by a kind of implied interpretation of the artist's purpose, to widen appreciation.

There are many picture lovers who expect a painting to portray simply and clearly the appearance of nature. They assume that the mood or feeling which nature itself would give is conveyed by a faithful transcription of the obvious visual facts which are associated with it. It is their supposition that pictorial art is a mirror of our visual environment. Others, however, look for the mood or feeling itself as the justification of the picture and they accept deviations from nature's appearance as being incidental to the other and, to them, more important purpose of the work—the expression of mood.

Between these two extremes artists reveal all degrees of interest. Some, like Inness, have begun as objective painters and gradually developed the other preoccupation: the "inner voice" has finally prevailed over the lure of the beauty about them. Others have looked outward at times and inward at other times, probably finding nature and their own emotions variously interesting from day to day.

It would not be difficult to classify DeCamp's *Sally* among the objective paintings, nor Benson's *Portrait of My Daughters* nor

Greenwood's *Melting Snow*. Sargent is as a rule objective, but what of his *Venetian Water Carriers*? Albert P. Ryder is of course a painter of the other type and his *Pegasus* is an outstanding creation with little reference to the ponderable world. Fuller, Hunt, Twachtman, Blakelock, LaFarge and Arthur B. Davies, all imaginative and preoccupied, are easy to place among the subjective groups.

But there are many more whose classification is far less clear. No two people will be certain to agree on Tryon's place in such a scheme. Nor will it be easy to place either Wyant or Winslow Homer's *The Gale* securely in either category.

When we come to the older paintings in the Museum the task becomes more difficult still. Objectification, in this age of science and photographic vision, has become a more conscious thing than once it was and modern psychology has given us a new attitude toward our subjective nature. The Impressionists and Post-impressionists are products of this modern condition of mind. It is sometimes difficult, too, to place the Italians of the Renaissance—and yet there are always to be found among them those in whom one or the other tendency becomes apparent. In such a work as Goya's vital *Portrait of Don Fray Miguel Fernandez* in the Museum collection the visual conviction is so balanced by the personal intensity of the interpretation that it becomes a problem to determine which is the stronger. Among the Gilbert Stuarts in the Early American Room one feels little doubt of the painter's objective attitude in his three Salisbury portraits, but in the *Mrs. Perez Morton* something more than the spark of an inner fire seems to have been kindled.

The subjective tendency shows itself in varied ways. In Ryder we find breadth and a certain vagueness of statement. In Stefan Hirsch's *New England Town*, which is likewise subjective, an excessive clarity and sharpness of contour. Whistler's *Fur Jacket* seems in its way as preoccupied as Fuller's *Winifred Dysart*, but it is well known that Whistler sometimes spent hours

posing his sitter to produce in the reality the thing he wished to project upon the canvas—which would place him, in method at least, among the objective painters.

In connection with the distinction we are here suggesting one fact demands emphasis. Even in Ryder's *Pegasus* those elements which refer specifically to nature—the horse's head, the bird wings and many parts of the attendant figures are, so far as they go, objective in their conception; while even in so objective a painting as DeCamp's *Sally* the simplifications of form about the eyes, the abandonment of the contour of the head in the shadowy background—all those deviations from nature which of themselves lead to the special mood of the picture—are subjective elements. No picture is ever purely of the one sort or the other. But in penetrating the veil of unreality on the one hand or the brilliancy of naturalistic illusion on the other we come nearer to a sympathetic approach to the essence of the work itself.

It is hoped that the present exhibition will be suggestive in connection with the paintings throughout the Museum and that, if there are those who have never made their peace with paintings which "do not look as nature looks," they will at least find interest in trying to arrange a truce, while to those who feel that subjective art alone is legitimate, the force and variety of the objective paintings will reveal that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in that philosophy.

G. W. E.